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Bad Spies And Good

A Convincing Thriller Of Moles and Men

By Jonathan Yardley

It's clear from "The Children's Game," his second novel, that David Wise has done something unusual and admirable: He has made the difficult transition from journalist to novelist, in the process revealing himself as equally adept at two forms of writing that have precious little in common. Well known for a number of years as the author of

THE CHILDREN'S GAME.
By David Wise.
(St. Martin's/Marek. 280 pp. $14.95.)

articles and books about the American intelligence and national security apparatus, Wise made his debut as a novelist a couple of years ago in "Spectrum," an entertaining thriller that seemed more a work of fictionalized reportage than a real work of fiction; but "The Children's Game" is the work of a novelist who obviously knows what he is doing and is comfortable with it.

Like "Spectrum," "The Children's Game" is a serious commentary on the role of the Central Intelligence Agency masquerading as a mere piece of escapist entertainment. Its central character, Bill Danner, once "a legendary figure" inside the CIA, is brought back into the agency on a mission familiar to readers of espionage fiction: To uncover a "mole" who apparently has penetrated the CIA and is turning over top secret information to the Soviet Union. It is a mission at first fiercely resisted by Danner, who left the CIA with bitter feelings some years before: but as he begins to dig into the case, moving from Langley to Vienna to Switzerland and ultimately to Moscow itself, the familiar excitement of the chase returns to him.

That chase is complicated by the puzzling role of the "old boys," a group of silk-rep-tie types who had been "the heart and soul of the agency during the 1950s and 1960s," who "shared a belief that the ordinary rules of morality, the rules that governed society as a whole, could be set aside by them in the higher interests of the state." Hundreds of these men had been fired or eliminated through attrition after the "Halloween Massacre" of 1977. Now there may be reason to believe that there is a connection between these "old boys" and the mole, that they may be trying to work up a "high-visibility scandal to embarrass the agency."

The more Danner digs, the more puzzling and dangerous things become. His 11-year-old daughter, Carrie, who lives with his former wife, is kidnaped. He falls in love with another CIA operative, Julie Norris, but fears that in some way she may be "working against him." He doesn't know whether to believe the information and leads supplied him by higher-ups in the CIA. The contacts he makes with the "old boys" only add to his confusion and his growing fear that something far more ominous than the burrowings of a mere mole is going on.

It is a complicated plot, and it contains an agreeably large number of quite genuine surprises—none of which, need it be said, is going to find its way into this review. It is also, because Wise cannot resist being a reporter even when he's a novelist, filled with a great deal of information, all of which has, to the lay reader at least, the ring of authenticity. Not only does Wise tell where, in Langley and environs, CIA employes eat, drink and shop; he also provides juicy details about such arcana as the "low-signature bullet," a "powerful transmitter" in the shape of a "tiny black beetle, about one-eighth of an inch long" and voice analysis involving "a complex mathematic process called a direct Fourier transformation." Of such tidbits are the warp and woof of espionage thrillers manufactured, and Wise supplies exactly the most satisfying amount of them.

He also moves all this business toward a serious point. Unlike many journalists or disaffected agents who specialize in writing about the CIA, Wise is not a reflexive opponent of government-sponsored espionage. The argument he makes in "The Children's Game" is essentially the same one he made in "Spectrum": The fault lies not with the idea of intelligence but with the forms it can take when the system becomes corrupted—even if it is corrupted for what seem the best and noblest of reasons. Bill Danner's quarrel is not with his country, which he knows must have covert as well as overt forms of self-defense, but with an intelligence leadership that thinks it can avoid the "rules of the game" in what it perceives to be the higher interests of the government.

The message in his two novels may be the same, but the method is not. "The Children's Game" is a far more controlled and sophisticated work of fiction than "Spectrum": its dialogue is tighter and more convincing, its descriptive prose less dependent on the cliches of pop fiction, its plot more carefully devised and thus more plausible. If its conclusion is perhaps rather more pat than the rest of the story seems to promise, that is a choice the novelist must be permitted to make. And there no longer can be any doubt that a novelist is what David Wise has become.